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ABSTRACT

Collaboration is an important concept in education today. Writing teachers are encouraged to collaborate with instructors in different disciplines and at different levels, and to set up collaborative projects for their students. Three writing teachers at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh have, for the past several years, held a spring conference with writing teachers from area junior high and high schools and community colleges. About 20-25 participants listen to 4 or 5 presenters, followed by discussions after each presentation. Among topics at a recent conference with the theme of honesty in writing and in teaching were "Honest Standards for Underprepared Students," questions about standards in courses beyond freshman composition, and a demonstration of a college writing course workshop on "Where Plagiarism Begins--And Ends." (Contains two sample forms.) (CR)

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ED 403 596

Straight Talk and Honest Writing

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Collaboration is an important concept in education these days. Writing teachers are encouraged to set up collaborative projects for their students and to collaborate themselves with instructors in different disciplines and at different levels. At the same time, at SUNY and elsewhere, funds are short and workloads are getting heavier. Three of us who teach writing at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh have found a way to get around these obstacles in order to create significant contact and collaboration among writing teachers at several levels.

For the past several years we have held a spring conference with writing teachers from area junior high and high schools and community colleges. The conferences grew out of weekly Friday afternoon discussion sessions among those of us who teach basic writing in the computer-equipped Writing Room in the Claude J. Clark Learning Center. We were joined this year by a community college instructor who drove 100 miles roundtrip to participate each week. The weekly meetings have been so valuable and productive for us as teachers that we decided several years ago to let others in on the conversation. Like the Friday meetings, the annual conferences have become an important forum for collegial support, networking, and information sharing among teachers of writing.

A primary reason the conferences have worked, we feel, is because we keep them very simple: not quite effortless, but almost. We send invitations to former attendees and to the chairs of departments of English at the various schools. We also invite all members of SUNY Plattsburgh's English department and instructors of Writing Across the Curriculum courses. An announcement is put in the local paper and in the college newsletter. The four of us who meet weekly choose a theme that has arisen from our discussions or that was indicated on the evaluation sheets from previous years as being of interest. Our letter of invitation announces the theme and the date and asks people who would like to speak briefly on some related topic to contact us. From these responses, we set up a simple program.

About 20-25 of us sit around the large seminar table in The Writing Room. The four or five presenters speak for about 10 minutes each on the topics they have chosen. Then one of us moderates a group discussion. The whole thing takes about two hours. Late afternoon works best so that junior high and high school teachers can come after school. Mid-May seems to be a good time as it falls immediately after finals week for us and between spring break and finals time for the school teachers.

The absence of big-name speakers does not impair the usefulness of the conference. In fact, the opportunity to present their own ideas in such a forum is very attractive to our local colleagues. We learn a lot from listening to one another. Feedback from attendees is unanimously positive: "inspiring," "great!," "immediately helpful," "a significant concern explored in a rational way," and "very useful" are among the comments we have received. Writing teachers have a tremendous interest in contact with one another and find it very valuable, we have learned.

If we can find someone to provide funds, we offer refreshments. The Dean of Arts and Science here commended this project in his review of last year's annual report of the English Department, so we sucessfully tapped him for money for refreshments this year. Refreshments and postage are our only expenses.

This year's conference was particularly productive, and we thought the outcome would be worth sharing with a wider audience. The theme of the conference was honesty in writing and in teaching. Five people gave prepared remarks. Sara Richman of our Educational Opportunity Program spoke on "Honest Standards for Underprepared Students." John Weldon of Clinton Community College raised some questions for discussion about standards in courses beyond freshman composition.

Marcia Gottschall of our Student Support Services spoke on "Talking It Through," a project of intervention and support for students working on major research projects in Writing Across the Curriculum courses. The presentation had originally been given at the Second International Writing Centers Conference held in St. Louis last fall.

I gave a brief demonstration of a workshop I present in many writing courses at our college entitled "Where Plagiarism Begins—and Ends." I maintained that avoiding plagiarism begins long before a draft is written at the steps of notetaking and of analysis and synthesis of information. Teachers who want to avoid plagiarized papers must give students instruction and practice in these important steps.

The climax of the conference was the presentation by Randy Beller of North Country Community College of a statement on honest writing and teaching developed by the Friday afternoon group. Our goal was to produce a statement that could be appended to syllabi and/or discussed in writing classes. The basic statement was discussed and slightly revised to reflect the input of the whole group. I sent a revised version to all attendees at the conference along with the list of attendees' addresses and phone numbers that I mail to participants each year in order to facilitate any networking that might have begun there.

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We offer our statement here as an example of the kind of results that school-college collaboration can achieve. We feel that it minimizes exhorting and threatening students and emphasizes the real purposes of writing. It can guide teachers as they try to involve students in real writing.

We encourage others to discover, as we have, the enormous value of regular discussions with colleagues. The old "KISS" adage about writing—Keep It Simple, (Stupid!)—works here too. With a minimum of effort and expense it is possible to provide a significant opportunity for writing teachers to collaborate with one another.

STATEMENT on HONEST WRITING

To the Student:

Honest writing, writing that is truly your own, requires energy, curiosity, and engagement. It is a process of discovery, an attempt by you as the writer to answer a question that you really need to answer for yourself. You learn by writing it, and the reader will learn by reading it. Your own insight and a personal connection are essential: what you tell us about the topic that no one else could gives a piece of writing true and honest value.

What you can do to create HONEST WRITING:

- the writing will be in your voice
- the writing will convey what you believe
- the writing will develop the topic uniquely from you
- the writing will show your understanding of and curiosity about the topic
- the writing will clearly and fairly acknowledge ideas from others
- the writing will be your work, showing your strengths as well as your weaknesses

From the Teacher:

I will be a fellow learner, eager and willing to learn from you. I will create situations that will promote HONEST WRITING. In turn, you can expect from me the same level of energy, curiosity, and engagement that I ask you to put into your writing.

developed by Randy Beller, Mary Dossin, Marcia Gottschall, and Harriette Walker for the 1996 SUNY-Plattsburgh High School/College Writing Teachers' Conference

Enhancing Honest Writing

HONEST WRITING by our students is often dependent on the writing situations that we create for them:

- provide a purpose for the writing or opportunities for our students to develop purpose
- develop writing assignments appropriate for the course level
- make clear our assignments
- prepare students for the assignment's requirements
- develop writing assignments specifically written for the current course, students, and time
- create assignments so that students are writing about topics on which they already have previous knowledge—if possible—and curiosity
- utilize the process approach
- allow students to take risks and make mistakes
- listen honestly to the students and ask them honest questions
- if we require outside source material, we must prepare students to understand, analyze, and synthesize the sources
- explain how and when to document
- demonstrate and reinforce the importance of honest notes
- take risks ourselves and let our students see us learn from our mistakes

Honest writing best serves our students' needs. We need to reinforce the positives of honest writing and not just the negatives of dishonest writing. From honest writing our students will become independent, self-sufficient, knowledgeable, and more in control.

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